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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR PRESSES DEPUTY PM SUTHEP ON VIKTOR BOUT
EXTRADITION, DISCUSSES THAI POLITICAL SITUATION

REF: BANGKOK 385 (ENGAGING PM ON BOUT)

Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (S) Summary: The Ambassador on March 4 pressed Thai Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban to ensure retraction or rebuttal of false court testimony in the extradition proceedings of Russian arms trafficker Viktor Bout, which resume March 6. Suthep said Prime Minister Abhisit had previously discussed the matter with him, and he would investigate and take appropriate action. On Thai politics, Suthep said the Thai public expected Abhisit to steer Thailand through the global economic crisis, even though many factors were outside of Abhisit's control. He cautioned against underestimating the influence of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Suthep briefly discussed RTG counterinsurgency efforts in southern Thailand, and the Ambassador said he hoped for a breakthrough in the case of missing lawyer Somchai Neelapaijit.

12. (S) Comment: Suthep clearly was familiar with the Bout case and understands it is a top priority for the USG. Separately, an official close to Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn assured us that the Crown Prince's associates had no connection with Bout and his team. Nevertheless, we have not yet seen that high-level RTG officials are prepared to engage actively with prosecutors to assure the highest possible probability of Bout's extradition. We will continue monitoring the extradition proceedings and pressing for a speedy and proper outcome. End Summary and Comment.

VIKTOR BOUT

13. (SBU) The Ambassador, accompanied by Poloff, called on Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban at Government House on March 4. As Deputy PM, Suthep is responsible for all security-related agencies, including the Ministries of Defense, Interior, and Justice; the Royal Thai Police; the National Security Council; and the National Intelligence Agency. Additionally, Suthep serves as Secretary General of the Democrat Party, and he has long worked closely with DP Leader (now Prime Minister) Abhisit Vejjajiva.

14. (S) Following opening pleasantries, the Ambassador said he wanted to raise the "critical" issue of Viktor Bout's extradition. This case was extremely important to the U.S. President Bush had raised it with Prime Minister Samak during an August 2008 visit, and it remained important for President Obama. Hours earlier, U.S. Attorney General Holder had

discussed the case over the telephone with his Thai counterpart, the Ambassador explained.

15. (S) The Ambassador acknowledged that the extradition case had to move through Thai legal processes, but the U.S. was concerned that there had been "serious problems" in those processes, as the Ambassador had explained recently to PM Abhisit (reftel). Bout and his lawyers were using non-legal means to attempt to influence the outcome of the case, and one result was the false testimony of a Royal Thai Navy (RTN) officer, who had indicated in court in late December that Bout had come to Thailand on a quasi-official mission (reftel).

16. (S) DPM Suthep said Abhisit had discussed the matter with him, as well as with the Defense Minister. Abhisit had stressed the USG interest in Bout's extradition, and the RTG had no interest in obstructing this. Suthep pledged to investigate the RTN official's actions, and whether he had testified in court in an official or private capacity. The Ambassador emphasized that, given the false testimony from an RTN official, it would be most appropriate for a higher-ranking RTN official to explain in court proceedings that Bout had not come to Thailand on a quasi-official mission. The Ambassador reiterated the critical nature of this case, emphasizing the lethal threat Bout had posed to the safety of American citizens. He added that a DOJ prosecutor was working at the Embassy and would be pleased to work more extensively with the Thais on this matter. Suthep reiterated his willingness in principle to assist and said he would welcome whatever information we could provide.

17. (S) Separately, Nipphon Promphan (Secretary General to the Prime Minister and a close associate of the Crown Prince) told us that he had met on March 2 with the Secretary to Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn, Air Chief Marshall Satitpong Sukvimol, and had relayed our concern that Bout would receive assistance from the Crown Prince's office (reftel). Nipphon told us that Satitpong denied that he or others in the Crown Prince's entourage had any association with Bout. Satitpong said he would use his resources to investigate this false claim of ties to the Palace.

DOMESTIC POLITICS AND THE ECONOMY

18. (C) Following their discussion of legal matters, the Ambassador asked Suthep's view of the domestic political situation. Suthep said he was not worried about the possibility of a no-confidence debate in the parliament. Rather, he was more concerned about efforts by "redshirt" activists allied with former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra to stir up popular sentiment against the government. Suthep said it was important not to underestimate Thaksin, who would not easily surrender and retained extensive financial resources. To address the populace's concerns, the RTG was sending cabinet Ministers to travel around the country and meet with both officials and the general public.

19. (C) Suthep said the Thai people expected Abhisit to steer Thailand through the current economic crisis. This was difficult for the administration, because the crisis was global and beyond Thailand's control. Suthep said he believed Thailand's extensive rural economy made the country less vulnerable than some others, but it would likely be necessary to follow up on the government's first stimulus program with subsequent efforts. The Ambassador noted that American corporations remained interested in making significant investments in Thailand, which, despite recent political turmoil, remained an appealing place for business.

THE SOUTH, COUNTERNARCOTICS

110. (C) Noting that he bore special responsibilities for the security environment in southern Thailand, Suthep said he could assure the Ambassador that the RTG would adhere to the

rule of law, and would not engage in extra-judicial killings.

The Ambassador welcomed that assurance and said he hoped that the latest efforts to resolve the fate of missing lawyer Somchai Neelapaijit would succeed (note: Somchai disappeared March 12, 2004. End note). Suthep said he, too, was hopeful, although it was difficult to obtain new evidence in that case.

¶11. (C) Suthep explained that the RTG had formed a subgroup of the cabinet (including the Ministries of Defense, Interior, Education, and Health) to focus on the South, and it was devising a five-year plan to improve the quality of life for southerners. The Ambassador assured Suthep that the USG hoped these efforts would succeed, but we understood any direct U.S. involvement in the border provinces could backfire to the RTG's detriment. Suthep agreed with the Ambassador and remarked tangentially that he and others in the RTG were focusing on counternarcotics efforts and would welcome further cooperation with the USG in that field.

ASEAN SUMMIT

¶12. (C) The Ambassador also congratulated Suthep on the RTG's successful hosting of the recent ASEAN Summit. The Ambassador explained that, in the run-up to the Summit, the Embassy's Regional Security Office had trained dozens of officials from the Police Special Branch in VIP protection methods. Suthep expressed his gratitude for this training.
JOHN